Intertext

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One Young Dog

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Autobiography and redundancy are natural associates. Keeping them apart in the act of recalling a life, any life, is no easy task. Given the assignment of imagining my autobiography and writing one of the chapters, I wanted to avoid repeating myself. "Tell me a story." It does not matter that I have lived it before. Telling it again becomes a new act,another page of the story. "Tell me a story," Jane Oberg asked. I thank her for the question.

If we do not know our own history, we are doomed to live it as though it were our own private fate.--Hannah Arendt

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Told that the soul teaches incessantly the young man asked Rebbe Pinhas why it was then that we do not learn? "The soul teaches incessantly" the Rebbe continued, "but it never repeats."

Forward

Some people are asked to write their life's story, while others force their story on us with all the vigor and vanity of a songbird. That some of these birds sing beautifully and are as fascinating as they think they are may just be one of those happy fortunes I might just as well question less and enjoy more. The reasons for writing an autobiography remain suspect, however. Murray proposes that writing an autobiography can be therapeutic. There are certain themes that haunt or house our lives with which we must deal, and do deal within in spite of ourselves. Bruner sees in auto biography clues to the mental landscapes in which we think through our existence. It provides us with a means for understanding how others understand themselves. I do not doubt that Murray and Bruner are right. Right and dull as last week's shine on the apple. Self-disclosure can be therapeutic, or destructive. Ibsen's *Wild Duck* comes to mind as an example of the latter. If you believe in self deception and even con sider the possibility of an unconscious, Bruner's claims fall flat. It seems to me these two constructs fail. Heibrun's construct is better made. The stories that women tell become the stories that women will live. I had many examples of how to be a human being, human as a man. It did not occur to me how many men's lives I had exposure to, to review and follow through to extinction in order to negotiate my way

through mine. As a mother-raised male I was also restricted by the small number of female lives I had before me to view and choose to emulate or ignore (though their specific gravity was great!). Heilbrun is correct. This is reason enough to tell our daughters every story we can think of, every story we have lived. There is an ethical justification, if no aesthetic justifi cation.

Having been asked to write an autobiographical piece I turned to a project that I have considered in the past. I have wanted to write a series of autobiographi cal short stories about Liverpool and the people that I grew up with and around. What follows is a first run at this. Each chapter is a short story. I have titled all of the stories and have provided glimpses into what they would be written around. Unfortunately, I never know what a story is really going to be about until it is over. The story I offer here is actually in transition. It is not over even though the "event" does take place.

A Strawberry Jam

The Larson farm grew strawberries and paid migrant workers a few cents per quart to pick them. One summer of wide sunshine and open fields, my brother and I got a job along side of them for the same few cents per quart. I do not recall the precise event, but a battle broke out between my brother and a group of the children migrant workers. They threw strawberries at each other. I knew that my brother had started it, and that he was in the wrong, but I took his side and joined in. We were fired. The other children were not. Mr. Larson told us, "It's their life, dammit. You kids are just playin' around."

Framing the choosing of sides and the pleasure of battle, the stark reality of migrant work and poverty rolled in like dark clouds.

Gonna Do, Gonna Do

I was nine years old when the Treadwell place went up in flames. The fire department had started it. They took all summer to burn it down. "Punishment," my mother murmured, looking out from our kitchen window and across the road.

"I hope they don't hurt the trees," she whispered.

I looked out the window, past her arm washing plates, around the edge of her sleeve, and saw the great pine soldiers glowing in the light of battle. Strangely silent beyond the muffled clatter of the dishes in the sink, the firemen went about their work like spirits weighted down by heavy coats and unbuckled boots. There was no hurry in their movement, no sense of urgency equal to what I saw. I caught my mother's sleeve.

"There, there." She looked down at me peeking from around her arm. "It's a practice fire. The firemen know what they're doing." We watched as orange light splashed through the roof, dissolving large chunks of it at a time. Black bags appeared under neath the window sills.

"Just don't hurt the trees," my mother repeated.

The road my parents had built our house on had been given to Joseph Hopkins, an officer in the Union army during the Civil War. The government had run out of cash and were paying their officers severance in land grants. The Treadwell's had been farming the land across from ours for at least three generations. Unfortunately the third act of their family saga turned to tragedy. Stories of madness and death, children who moved across the country, never to return, and a daughter who hung herself from a hook in the attic. Before the practice fires, Billy Williams and I explored the vacant house and found the bloody hook. Only it wasn't bloody. It was clean and white and evil look ing. We found it in the attic, as legend had it, four -fingered and sharp. A door fell open from underneath it. Billy stretched out across the absent floor and pulled on the hook.

"Not. . .too. . .shabby. . ." he grunted as he pulled.

"How old was she?"

"Sweet sixteen and never been kissed!" He held on to the hook and swung out and down. "I wouldn'ta kissed her."

"I would've." I declared, more to be contrary than because of a positive thought. Billy let go of the evil claw and fell to the floor below.

"Rusty'd kiss a corpse! Rusty'd kiss a corpse!" He rolled from side to side as he chanted.

"Not then! Before she died!"

Billy Billy (he had two first names) jumped up and skipped out of view.

"Gonna do, gonna do. . ." I heard him begin some

other song as I reached out toward the hook and felt its cold memory. I shook my hand harder than I had ever shook it before as I ran back down the stairs.

After that first fire my mother would not let me go back into the Treadwell's house. I know that Billy did. He lived at the end of the road, in what was once a one room school house. It had been fire engine red, we were told. It had long since been singed gray. Time and neglect would have burned that house down, if the children of the neighborhood did not beat them to it. Billy's father worked for the farmer Larson. From what I gathered, he worked six and one-half days a week. And for this great labor he was given the house to keep his family in and a small piece of land on which to raise that family and whatever else he wanted. I could never figure out what the attraction was with cabbage. When Billy and his brother John and sister Helena snuck into our above-ground pool while we were away, and split the sides of the pool like a burst can of peas, washing my mother's garden away, Mr. Williams brought us cabbage. When my mother dropped off clothing for Helena with the coal black eyes, Mr. Williams would drop off some cabbage. My mother would accept it with a smile and a nod of her head, "Why, thank you Mr. Williams. How sweet of you! But you really shouldn't." A chorus of amens and hallelujahs would have followed that, if thoughts had their way.

Mrs. Williams was a quiet woman. She sat at the foot of the stairs in the back of the house during the day looking at their television. No picture. Only sound. She smoked filterless Camels, letting them drop from her fingers like dead caterpillars. She rarely spoke to her children, instead she would scream orders or complaints in quick fits, and then return her attention to the vacant white light of the TV screen. I thought that the machine had stolen her mind. One evening I went over for supper. The table was uneven. In order to balance things out, she propped the salt and pepper shakers with matchbooks, and folded napkins half-way under our plates. I pretended not to notice, and complemented her on the meal. Billy knew I was lying, but he was also grateful. He knew she did not really understand a lot of things. Life was a large mystery she would never be able to solve, and so it was best to keep up with the soaps, and marvel at their way of handling it all. Through the years he passed from unimpeded affection, to embarrassment and rage at her thick ignorance. When he last saw her, there was forgiveness in his tears.

The pounding at the door woke me up. As I made my way through the breezeway, my brother already ahead of me, Mr. Williams was coming through the door.

"Damn kid." He swung off his hat, shook the damp from its brim and placed it under the arm he extended to my father.

"Thanks t'ya. I don't know where he's off to. Crying, crazy-like. I been all ta places. Thought your son'd have an idea." He looked at me. My father looked at me. My mother, who was pulling her robe around her waist as she

pushed her foot into a slipper, looked at me. Even my brother was looking at me as if I had to have the answer. As if who else could have the answer. I didn't really know the question.

"He's run away." Mr. Williams continued. There was panic and hurt in his voice, all jammed into the space of those three words. I told him that I had not seen Billy that day and that I did not know anything about his running away.

"Can I use your telephone?"

The Williams family did not have a phone.

"Of course. It's in the kitchen. I'll get my keys. We can drive around and see if we can find him."

It was cold. We checked the Treadwell place first. I told them about Billy continuing to go into the farm house even after the fire department had begun to use it for practice fires.

"Billy!" My father called out. We stood at the porch and waited for him and Mr. Williams to come out.

"Nine houses." My mother shook her head. "The man had to walk by nine houses in order to use a telephone. And so upset and worried." She patted my hair softly. "We'll find him. Did Mr. Williams say how his wife is? I'll have your father drop me off when they go look for him in the car."

Billy was not in the house. After dropping my mother off to check on Mrs. Williams and the other children, my father and Mr. Williams drove up and down the roads. I was in the back seat. My eyes were red and watery, but I could look just as hard as anyone could. We drove for a very long time. Mr. Williams spoke in broken sentences.

"I do m'best. I work. She's s'posed to see to him and the girl. Johnny's okay. Slower'n shit. Like his mom. She's not tellin' the truth. He don't hate me. Billy's my first born. He don't hate me."

"Gonna do, gonna do. . ." I heard Billy's voice in my brain. "Gonna grow up to be a god." His voice came out of the night through the seal of the car windows closed tight against the cold.

"Gonna do, gonna do. Gonna grow up to be a god, and never have to die, or worse to have a death . . ." Billy's poem went on and on in my head as I peered through the heavy darkness. Mr. Williams was mur

muring more to himself now. His head circled as his eyes scanned the dark fields on the side of the road.

"She's s'posed to see to him. He'd never say that about me. I'm his father.She's a liar. Slow, stupid liar."

My father looked at me. He had never met Mrs. Williams.

"There!" I hollered.

Billy was walking in the center of the road. He held his arms out ahead of him. In each hand he was carrying a candle. Both were lithalo stains against the black sky. Mr. Williams padded from the car and was at Billy's side by the time my father and I ap proached.

"Gonna do what, son? Shit, gonna do what?" Mr. Williams knocked the candles from Billy's hands in two sweeping motions. Billy didn't seem to notice at first. As if coming out of a trance, he stopped walking and turned to his father.

"Gonna grow up to be a god, daddy. A god."

Mr. Williams swept him up in his arms and carried him back to the car.

Young Dogs

We were like puppies really. A haunted house, broken glass, drunken workers from the General Electric plant. . .a mystery solved. We were too young and too dumb to know just how dangerous things were. We took on the mystery and solved it. Drunks and fire, glass and rage. Young dogs, pissing and laughing and lunging our way through an adventure.

Nate Perry

Some of our heroes are discovered after much time. Nate Perry, principal of Buckley Road Elementary School, is one such hero. I was often in trouble and in his office, crying, leaving a pile of shredded tissue at my feet. It was my way of assuring him that I was not truly repentant. He would often come into a class and walk Billy Billy to his office.

Billy Billy was always in trouble too. His trouble seemed worse though, and it was. We would giggle at his fate, imagining what terrible punishment Mr. Perry would devise. Years later I found out that Mr. Perry would buy him shoes every six months, take him out for lunch and a haircut, buy him a durable winter coat, and more-or-less treat him like a grand son that he loved.

Billy Billy was predictably in trouble much of the time. Mr. Perry also knew how proud his spirit was. Nobody but his secretary and a few other adults knew. They renamed Buckley Road Elementary many years later. In letters clear enough, if not large enough, it is now called Nate Perry Elementary School. It is undoubtedly more than he would have wanted.

Trees, Tees and Ice Cream

Trees have endured with me as companions over a lifetime. From the willow tree my parents planted by the side of the house, to the elm under which I stole my first kiss, through a theory of personality I proposed consisting of

"tree-ness" equaling health, rather than "pine-ness" or "oak-ness" as the established theories held. A trip through the wood. A stroll with me and some trees, and the memories I have hung upon those trees.

The Night is Like a Thief

Father Anthony Keefe was the first truly Christian man I ever met. Goodness and humor attended him wherever he went. He brought room enough for angels, and courage enough for at least one other soul. On a Thanksgiving night a man with a knife broke into the rectory to steal the parish car. Father Keefe was attacked and cut up very badly. The man was apprehended the same night and taken to jail. After Father Keefe was stitched and bandaged up, he visited the man in his cell, arranged for legal counsel, and added this man's burdens to those he would carry for as long as it took, or for as long as it mattered. God works in moments. Miracles are for the long-haul.

Mary Baker Eddy Abroad

Mark Twain disliked Mary Baker Eddy and her hybrid religion, Christian Science, emphatically! He wrote at length about its fakery and intellectual plagiarisms. I went to Nice, France with a Christian Scientist named Tom, a woman from Washington State named Margaret, and a model from California named Elda. We dumped Margaret, broke into the train station, camped under an aqueduct, and wrestled with life on the shores of the Mediterrain. Life won. Not quite "inno cents abroad," but a story worth telling. **Autumn**

Autumn is my time of yearsummer going southwinter coming near. Associations. I return to this theme. I try to show the ego and the arrogance of high school football. How I got to start as a senior after another young man broke his neck. How some cheerleaders were not sluts, or vain, or both. How teachers are students and students teach great lessons. How being shamed by a young man with cerebral palsy stopped the unmerciful teasing of another young man who just did not fit in.

Pater Ann

Love. This story is tough to tell, and I don't know that I can or will ever he able to tell it. As Annie Dillard correctly pointed out, truth cannot be written to be told. . .some truths are just too impor tant. I was no longer a child after this relationship. If you lose the key to a lock, what are you to do? You break the lock. This lets you in. She left me broken, but perhaps, finally, more accessible. Love is a secret that we tell in the silence as we go.

{Pater is 'father' in Latin, as for a priest. In a differ ent set of circumstances, she would have been a priest. As it is, she ministers truthfully and compas sionately enough.}

Afterward

Story telling is an essential feature of being human. Autobiography is perhaps the literary equivalent to what existentialists meant by an authentic act. It seems to me, however, that we can tell our own story, truly, through the stories that we tell. In so doing we allow the reader not only to hear, but to see their way through it. I doubt that I came anywhere near accomplishing this in this exercise, but I hope that I may have pointed in the direction I was headed.